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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GEORGETOWN 000045

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SUBJECT: FLOODS PLAGUE GUYANA, AGAIN

1. SUMMARY. Since late December, flooding has plagued coastal Guyana, particularly the centers of agricultural production. After initially dismissing the magnitude of the flooding, the GOG has begun a massive public relations and relief spending effort. The GoG's initial underestimate of the magnitude of the flooding, and its ongoing failure to take preventative measures, suggest the lessons of the January/February 2005 floods have gone unlearned. END SUMMARY.

2. Flooding attributed to seasonally high rains has been plaguing most of coastal Guyana except greater Georgetown since the end of December. The independent Stabroek News reported on December 25 that flooding in the eastern region of Mahaicony had been occurring for a week. The paper followed on January 5 with reports of flooding in Black Bush Polder, in the Corentyne region, eastern Guyana. Coverage of flooding in Canals 1 and 2 polders on the West Bank of the Demerara River and in the backlands of the Essequibo coast and the Pomeroon River region soon followed. These are all agricultural areas a few miles inland from the coastal strip where 90% of Guyana's population lives. The coast road and greater Georgetown vicinity has NOT/NOT experienced significant flooding to date. After an initially slow response, the GOG has mobilized a highly public flood relief campaign, with virtually every cabinet minister visiting one of the affected regions.

3. No Embassy properties have been affected, and Peace Corps reports no volunteers are in the affected areas. Post's Emergency Action Committee has met to review flood tripwires and responses.

UNCERTAIN CAUSES

4. Opinions about the causes of the flooding have been as political as they have been meteorological. The GOG attributes the flooding to excessive rainfall in the interior, noting for instance that in some areas of the Pomeroon, five inches of rain have fallen for every three that have drained. In some early statements, GOG officials also laid the blame on the failure of local government institutions to adequately maintain the drainage system. Agriculture Minister Satyadeow Sawh has also been quoted criticizing the media for inaccurate coverage of the flooding. Opposition leader Robert Corbin criticized the administration for the flooding in his New Year's address. The Government Information Agency condemned his remarks and countered that climate change contributed to heavy rainfall that caused the floods, noting that the U.S. has also experienced heavy rains. Cracks of blame have also appeared within the ruling party. Presidential Secretariat Head Roger Luncheon publicly criticized the government's own Minister of Housing and Water, Sheik Baksh, saying t his weekly media briefing that Baksh should be "pilloried" for lack of results.

5. Meanwhile, some farmers in the affected regions have speculated that flooding was due to drainage from the East Demerara Water Conservancy (EDWC). The Mahaicony region flooded in early 2005 after officials made the eleventh-hour decision to open the drainage outlets into the Mahaica River to facilitate drainage in Georgetown and ease pressure on the EDWC. Others counter that this theory is implausible due to the localized nature of the flooding; drainage from the EDWC would first flood Mahaica, which was also devastated in the 2005 floods but has been spared to date. Some farmers contend that a water storage project in the area has channeled excess drainage into the Mahaica Creek, which has overrun its banks. Independent television commentator Tony Vieira further speculated in his weekend commentary that the failure to adequately dredge the Mahaica River's mouth has led to a build-up of silt that prevents adequate drainage. The Consul also reported evidence of trash and poor maintenance of canals following a recent trip to the Berbice region. NOTE: Post has been tracking the water level in the EDWC, in accordance with the Emergency Action Plan. Post has also been receiving data from the Hydromet Office, however, this information is of limited use, as thirteen of fourteen rainfall gauges are on the coast and thus do not report interior rainfall. END NOTE.

UNCERTAIN EFFECTS

16. The economic effects of the flooding remain to be seen. The flooded areas are primarily used for rice cultivation and cattle rearing, and media reports have stated that some 28,000 acres of rice have been lost. According to the Rice Producers Association, this would amount to G\$1.1 billion (US\$5.5 million) assuming a price of G\$1,600 (US\$7.96) per bag and output of 25 bags per acre. Meanwhile, President Jagdeo said in a press conference on January 9 that as many as 300 head of cattle had perished as a result of the flood. There have also been spot reports of prices for local produce doubling at markets in Parika and Georgetown. However, PolOff reports that prices were unchanged as of Saturday, January 7.

17. The long-term impact of the flooding is debatable. However, Nizam Hassan, Executive Director of the New Guyana Marketing Corporation, told EconOff on January 7 that he believes flood loss estimates, based on individual farmer's requests for flood relief compensation, are overblown. He does not yet anticipate a threat to production of produce. In addition, with election year politics as a background, the GOG's announcements of flood relief, even if they were to materialize, may not be a reliable indicator of true flood damages.

18. The impact on government finances is also an issue. President Jagdeo has already pledged at least G\$60 million (US\$299 thousand) in emergency flood relief and has said that the GOG may need to spend as much as G\$500 million (US\$2.5 million) to buy equipment to drain the flooded areas. The GOG has not made nor received any requests for international assistance as of January 10.

19. The Health Ministry issued a statement on January 8 warning citizens of the risk of leptospirosis, a water-borne disease carried in animal urine. The disease was responsible for 15 deaths during the early 2005 floods. The Ministry of Health has placed 12 supposed cases on the high index of suspicion since November, two of which have tested positive.

10. COMMENT: What is not questionable is the GOG's mishandling of the flood situation. After initially dismissing the media's coverage of the flood problem as overblown, then saying it had not been properly kept abreast of the situation, the GOG is now engaged in a high profile scramble to address the matter. This inept response presented opposition parties with a golden opportunity to score political points with a disaffected Guyanese public in an election year, but the rudderless opposition failed to capitalize. This is the normally rainy season in coastal Guyana, and many of the affected areas were also underwater during last year's devastating floods. The absence of simple factual data about levels of rainfall and status of drainage infrastructure combined with the GOG's incoherent approach suggests that Guyana has learned little from the past and remains at the mercy of the rains. END COMMENT.

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